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What's Fact and What's Fiction in *Cassandra*

Gael García Bernal plays the gay *luchador* who won the heart of Mexico. But are any of the film's punches for real?

BY ELLIN STEIN

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Saúl Armendáriz, who performs under the name Cassandra, and Gael García Bernal in the new biopic. Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by David Becker/Getty Images for Prime Video, Alejandro Lopez Pineda/Amazon Content Services LLC, and Getty Images Plus.

Cassandra, the new film starring Gael García Bernal as the charismatic, pioneering wrestler Saúl Armendáriz, takes us into the world of lucha libre—a sport widely beloved in Mexico and one that makes the WWE look restrained in comparison. As in WWE bouts, the outcome is scripted, with the (usually) masked *luchadores* expected to put on a good show full of drop kicks, backflips, leaping off the ropes, and theatrical roaring. But lucha libre has its own rules and traditions, notably with regard to role: Wrestlers are divided into *técnicos*, the good guys who follow the rules and must always win, and *rudos*, the bad guys who cheat and must always lose. There's also a third category, the *exóticos*. These wrestlers compete

glammed up in draggy sequins and makeup, and play an effeminate gay caricature until they ultimately lose to the macho *técnico*, generally with a helping of homophobic insults from the crowd. But traditionally, the glitter stayed inside the ring—for decades, most *exóticos* maintained that they were straight in real life.

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That is, until Armendáriz arrived on the scene in the late 1980s. An out gay man and talented wrestler (he became the first *exótico* to win a Universal Wrestling Association championship in his weight class in 1992), his athleticism combined with his gifts as an entertainer won him a huge fan base, turning the jeers to cheers and making him a gay role model in the process. Already profiled in multiple documentaries, Armendáriz—better known by his nom de guerre *Cassandra*—is now the subject of this biopic directed by Roger Ross Williams. Here, we look at where the film—now [streaming on Amazon Prime](#)—shows us its subject's true face and where it pulls up the mask.

Did Cassandra Get His Wrestling Name From a Telenovela?

In the film, Saúl, played with industrial-strength charm by García Bernal, lives with his mother Yocasta (Perla de la Rosa), mending the clothes she takes in for washing and watching telenovelas with her. When he decides to become an *exótico*, he chooses the name *Cassandra*, inspired by a telenovela starring the singer and actress Verónica Castro, one of his mother's favorites.

In fact, when Armendáriz first fought as an *exótico*, he did so under the name *Rosa Salvaje*, the name of a different telenovela Castro starred in. He changed it to *Cassandra* after he lost a match against another *exótico* called Johnny Vannessa where they had a bet that the loser would forfeit his name. He took the name *Cassandra* not as a tribute to Castro but in honor of a Tijuana brothel owner known for giving money to the poor.

Did Cassandra Initially Begin Wrestling Under the Name El Topo?

According to the movie, Saúl is stuck wrestling at small local matches in Ciudad Juárez as a character called El Topo (“The Mole”), sent out as a “runt” for the *técnico*—in this case a *luchador* aptly called Gigantico (playing himself)—to display his mastery over. The self-trained Saúl is happy to be involved with *lucha libre* at all but is also frustrated by never being allowed to show what he can really do. He seeks out Sabrina (Roberta Colindrez), a female *luchador* who wrestles under the name Lady Anarquía. She sees his promise and starts to train him, urging him to leave El Topo behind and perform as an *exótico*. He becomes Cassandra and almost immediately his fortunes start to improve.

In actuality, Armendáriz debuted in the ring as a *rudo* called *Mister Romano* who wore an intimidating black-and-white mask and was not in the least molelike. Far from being a complete amateur when he started, he had already trained for two years with a well-known Tijuana *luchador* named Rey Misterio.

There is an actual *luchador* named Anarquía, but his female counterpart may be an invention. At any rate, it was another *exótico* known as Baby Sharon “who encouraged me to step out of Mister Romano,” [Armendáriz told the New Yorker](#) in 2014. Even before becoming Cassandra in 1988, Armendáriz had enjoyed some success as Rosa Salvaje, tag-teaming in matches with another capable *exótico* known as Pimpinela Escarlata.

Was Cassandra an Only Child?

The filmic Yocasta is not only Saúl’s mother, she’s his best friend, urging him to get out there and meet a nice man. The film suggests that it’s just been the two of them since Saúl’s father, a married man who refused to divorce his wife, stopped visiting after Saúl came out at 15.

In fact, Armendáriz’s father was married to Yocasta until the boy was 13, when they divorced. He had an alcohol problem and was violent toward his wife. As for being an only child, a family photograph shows Armendáriz, his parents, and four siblings, all dressed identically. It is true that his father rejected him, but the wrestler has said that this alienation started much earlier, as it became apparent the boy was effeminate from a young age. “My daddy never accepted me. I started being [harassed] at age 7. People could tell from a mile away I was a little Tinkerbelle. I was an easy target,” he said in [the documentary *Cassandra, Queen of the Ring*](#).

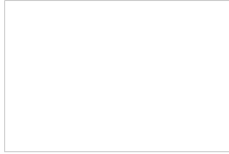
Did Cassandra Have an Affair With a Married Man?

As he begins his ascent in the ring, Saúl falls for Gerardo (Raúl Castillo), a *técnico* who fights under the name El Comandante and whose ring drag suggests a Folsom Street leather daddy. The two start a passionate relationship that Gerardo insists remain secret because he’s not comfortable with being gay in public, let alone leaving his wife and children. The relationship sputters along for a couple of years but, when Gerardo refuses to appear in public as a couple at a moment when Saúl really needs him, they split up.

This is broadly true, although the time frame is compressed. In reality, the relationship lasted much longer, and according to Armendáriz, it broke up because of career jealousy, not because of anxiety about going public. “I spent 12 years with a straight married lover,” he told the New Yorker. “From the age of 18 to 30. It was very damaging. There were five, 10, 15

minutes of heaven in bed. Otherwise, he was bitching at me. ... We both went to Mexico City. But only my career went up and up and up. He was with his wife, in Juárez.”

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Did Cassandra Go off the Rails the Night Before His Big Break?

Saúl gets invited to participate in a match in Mexico City that will launch his career to another level—a televised fight against the legendary El Hijo del Santo, Mexico's most popular luchador and the world welterweight champion. Cassandra is not expected to win (Santo Jr. always wins), though he is expected to put up a good fight, one that could secure his career. But, in the run-up to this Rocky-vs.-Apollo Creed-like encounter, Saúl breaks up with Gerardo and then loses his mother. The night before the match, he goes out on the town in Mexico City with Sabrina, drinking far too much and doing coke till dawn.

The reality was worse. A week before the 1991 match, Armendáriz attempted suicide. His life was saved by Pimpinela Escarlata, who found him in time. Nevertheless, Cassandra still showed up for the match and won Son of Santo's good opinion, with the two becoming friends. Also, Armendáriz was still together with his married lover at the time, and Yocasta was still going strong. However, her death six years later did send him off the rails (or further off the rails, as he was already needing large amounts of tequila, marijuana, and cocaine to keep going) before he got help.

Did Son of Santo Really Never Remove His Mask?

The Son of Santo, who plays himself, wears a silver mask bequeathed to him by his father, the legendary El Santo (“the Saint”). The other *luchadores* tell Cassandra, who fights maskless, that he never takes it off. And indeed, in a scene where the Son of Santo has Cassandra as a guest on his talk show, the host wears the silver mask over his suit and tie.

This is largely true. *Luchadores* are rarely seen in public without their masks, which are as distinctive as their faces and the key to their ring identity (the Son of Santo has said he wears his 18 hours a day). His father, El Santo, considered the great popularizer of the sport through his televised matches as well as appearing in some 50 movies, was said to never remove his mask, even in private. If traveling by air, he took a different flight than his crew so that they wouldn't see his face when he had to remove his mask to get through customs. In 1984, shortly before his death and by then retired, he removed his mask for a moment on national TV, the first time his face had been seen in public in 42 years. But the mask was back on for his wake and burial. The most significant matches in a wrestler's career are not title bouts but the mask vs. mask fights, where the *luchadores* bet their masks on the

outcome. The loser is not only unmasked, but his mask is retired and can't be used again. The longer a *luchador* keeps the same mask over the course of their career, the higher his status in the *lucha libre* world.

Is Cassandro Really As Small As He's Portrayed on Screen?

The movie shows the small-but-mighty García Bernal, as Cassandro, defeating much larger *luchadores* through a combination of cunning, speed, and daring. The real Cassandro is 5'5", two inches shorter than the actor. 🏳️‍🌈

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